

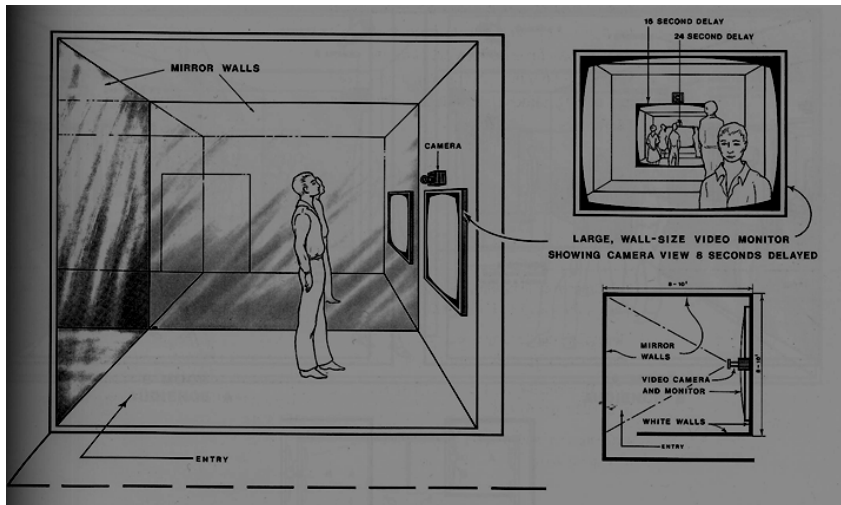
Perception

Part of Dan Graham's work deals with the structural tension arising from the interplay between objective and subjective perception within a given visual milieu and the self-perceptions of the perceiver. He does so by constructing technical apparatus that set up vertiginous circuits through which the perceiver and the perceived continuously change both position and status; this represents an investigation into the techno-social structures of perception and the specular *mise-en-abyme* inherent to contemporary subjective experience. This represents an essential aspect to his work that is particularly to the fore in his pieces intersecting video information circuits, architectural structures, and live performance.

For example, take the work *Present Continuous Past(s)* (1974)¹. In this piece (as in many others), Graham constructed both a perceptive and a specular apparatus in which the production of images fundamentally results from an optico-reflective structure that functions insofar as the viewer is a constituent part. When the installation room is empty, nothing happens. The optical machine remains inactive, time and space are abstractions empty of empirical content. When members of the audiences walk in, their movements are immediately reflected on the mirror; they immediately see their images on the mirror-walls. After an eight second interval, images become produced out of other images. The subject of perception then becomes split into an optical point of view and the image's 'content'. Once the image becomes the image of *something*, perception occurs; once the image becomes the image of the perceiver perceiving, a series of close specular and/or informational circuits are formed. Two distinct 'eyes' set the visual apparatus – the I-eye of the spectator and the mechanical eye of the camera – to which a subjective (human-moving) and an objective (mechanic-static) point of view are connected. Here, subjective and objective perception refers to the point of view implicit in the image, that is, to the spatial and temporal position of the image in relation to the visual apparatus making the image possible². In a first instance, the subjective perception corresponds to the image captured by the eye and framed by the mirror, the reflective images created by the mirror facing the video camera and monitor and by the mirror perpendicular to it.

1. This is how Graham describes the piece: "The mirrors reflect present time. The video camera tapes what is immediately in front of it and the entire reflection on the opposite mirrored wall. The image seen by the camera (reflecting everything in the room) appears eight seconds later on the video monitor (via a tape delay placed between the video recorder, which is recording, and a second video recorder which is playing the recording back). If a viewer's body does not directly obscure the lens's view of the facing mirror, the camera tapes the reflection of the room and the reflected image of the monitor (which shows the time recorded eight seconds previously). A person viewing the monitor sees both the image of himself eight seconds ago, and that reflected of him/herself on the mirror from the monitor eight seconds ago, which is sixteen seconds in the past (because the camera view of eight seconds prior was playing back on the monitor eight seconds ago, and this was reflected in the mirror along with the then present reflection of the viewer). An infinite regress of time continuums within time continuums (always separated by eight second intervals) within time continuums is created. The mirror at right angles to the other mirror-wall and the monitor wall gives a present-time view of the installation, as if observed from an "objective" vantage point exterior to the viewer's subjective experience and the mechanism that produces the piece's perceptual effect. It simply reflects (statically) present time". ("Present Continuous Past(s)" in Dan Graham, *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art* (Massachusetts: MIT Press 1999), pp. 39–40. Originally published in *Dan Graham: Video/Architecture/Television: Writings on Video and Video Works 1970–1978*, ed. Benjamin Buchloh [Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York: New York University Press, 1979, p. 7]).

2. Throughout the text, the term perception relates to the production of actual images.



Dan Graham, *Present Continuous Past(s)*, 1974

Conversely, the objective perception corresponds to the images mechanically captured by the camera and shown on the monitor. On this level, we argue that the set of reflective and projective images produce objective and subjective perceptions as these indicate what is perceived from 'subjective' and 'objective' viewpoints.

There is, however, another set of relations between the images created that complicates this first distinction between the objective and subjective perceptions. Here, the objective and subjective stand stems from the interrelation of the images within the installation's schema, the way they bring about an internal or external space for perception. On the one hand, there are the images created by the feedback loop, which originate within the optico-informational circuit mirror-camera-monitor; on the other hand, there are the perpendicular mirrored walls which allow, according to Graham, the objective perception of the installation's mechanism. Insofar as the objective and subjective perception are distinguished in terms of their ability to point to a place which is, respectively, external and internal to the set or frame constituting the visual milieu of the image itself, we may argue that the monitor presents a series of subjective perceptions whereas the perpendicular mirror presents a series of objective perceptions. This occurs because the mirror reflects the 'external' and objective viewpoint of the installation's visual circularity and the monitor shows the set of images that immerses the viewer in the installation's visual apparatus. In this sense, the camera produces 'subjective' specular images whereas the perpendicular mirror provides 'objective' reflection. We may refer to a visual apparatus through which visual reflection and speculation is respectively connected to objective and subjective perception. However, this connection is valid only insofar as the objective and the subjective, the reflective and the speculative,

perceptions interrelate with each other. These are perceptive positions arising from the interrelationship between reflective and circular images. *Present Continuous Past(s)* constructs singular viewpoints that prove both 'objective' and 'subjective' insofar as they are positioned within a close, in relation to itself, but partial and open, in relation to the whole of the installation, optical circuit.

Both the closed relationship of the image to the implicit point-of-view and the dynamic relationship between 'objective' and 'subjective' images bring about the *opticalisation* of the viewer as he/she is reduced to optical positions and image content. However, the circuit mirror-camera-monitor (the circuit which positions the camera as the 'subjective' point-of-view) and its time-delayed feedback loop, repositions, as it were, the perceiver as the subject who perceives him/herself perceiving. Through the images originating from the closed time-delay circuit, a kind of image-subject takes shape. As soon as the viewer recognises him/herself on the monitor, he/she actively responds to the time delayed feedback circuit mirror-camera-monitor. Here, the subject is not reduced to an optical point of view within the given visual structure as he/she 'interacts' with the images produced in his/her capacity as perceiver, actor and object perceived. We may even argue that the subject regains its interiority, but only through the production of external images (reflection and projection). We are certainly far from the formation of a zone of narcissistic fascination in which the image of the self is repeatedly posited as a moment of self-recognition. The installation connects subjective recognition with the presence of another observer (the camera and the future viewer of the video monitor), so that observing is equated with being observed. In Friedrich Wolfram Heubach's words:

After all this, it is quite clear that Dan Graham's video installations give the observer a view of himself in which he does not find himself confirmed as a subject but experiences himself dissolved into his dynamic relationship to his image. They illustrate his subjectiveness as an attitude toward his image, his relationship to himself in an image — his dynamic relationship to his image.

And relating oneself to one's image is a social condition.³

This social condition arises therefore from the confrontation of the subject with an external image of which he/she is the content; from the very possibility of becoming an image. Symptomatically, Graham identifies two main theoretical influences behind his production of the video installations in the 1970s:

I was very interested in behaviourism and phenomenology.

3. Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, "The Observed Eye, or Making Seeing Visible (on the video works of Dan Graham)" in *Dan Graham* ed. Gloria Moure (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1998), p. 193.

Behaviourism was an American idea of just functional description, of the physiological movement of the body outside of consciousness. Phenomenology was a European idea of consciousness that also became important in American art at that time. Then primitive video was used in scientific laboratories to investigate physiological movement and I used it in time-delays to investigate brain-time.⁴

Action

Following the analysis advanced above, the tension arising between behaviourist physiological externality and phenomenological subjectivity reflects the move towards the relationship between perception and action. As seen, the circuit mirror-camera-monitor generates such a kind of images of movement whereby the 'subjectivity' of the observer is shaped by his/her relation to his/her own image. This condition only proves possible through the insertion of the viewer into a given techno-optical situation. As Graham suggests, the images of action stem from the interrelationship between a certain milieu (the techno-optical structure) and the corresponding action of the perceiver 'caught' within it. From the point of view of the video installation's optical construct, the actions or behaviours (observable actions) of the viewer seem alien and unproductive since they are unable to change the given parameters of the mechanism. Actions are only able to determine the content of subjective perception but not the technical milieu that makes this possible. Furthermore, the time-delay relationship between action images already indicates a productive process which, as far as behaviourism goes, overflows the redundancy of "functional description" as technical observation conditions the behaviour of the subject observed⁵.

The perception of action is short-circuited through the insertion of two specific visual axes: the perpendicular mirrored-walls and the feedback loop based on an 8 second time-delay⁶. From a perceptive point of view, the perpendicular mirrors 'suspend' the movement of the video feedback loop giving a view of the installation's wider schema. However, for Graham the 'objective' viewpoint provided by the mirror is in fact constructed so as to frame the viewer in an inverted "Renaissance painting" visual set. Moreover, Graham, influenced by Lacan's notion of the mirror stage, associated the framing of the perceiver in the "picture-window" or mirror to the formation of a perceiving self. In a mechanism parallel to the video-mirror circuit, subjective and objective reflective perceptions are mutually conditioned. The viewer is torn between the 'objective' and the 'suspended' viewpoint of the visual apparatus, and the perception of oneself through the Renaissance pictorial frame; likewise, the visual milieu is either the installation's technical apparatus or that framed by the classic pictorial window. By looking in the

4. Apolonija Sustersic, "One Morning Talking with Dan Graham" in *Dan Graham* ed. Gloria Moure, p. 33.

5. The performance *Performance/Audience/Mirror* (1977) provides a good account of what might be termed the behaviourist continuous dislodgment of both perception and behaviour. This is how Graham describes this piece: "A performer faces a seated audience. Behind the performer, covering the back wall (parallel to the frontal view of the seated audience), is a mirror reflecting the audience.

Stage 1

The performer looks in the general direction of the audience. He begins a continuous description of his external movements and the attitudes he believes are signified by this behavior for about five minutes. The audience hears the performer and sees his body.

Stage 2

The performer continues facing the audience. Looking directly at them, he continuously describes their external behavior for about five minutes. (See observation 2.)

Stage 3

The performer faces the mirror (his back turned to the audience). For about five minutes he continuously describes his front body's gestures and the attitudes it may signify. He is free to move about, in order to better see aspects of his body's movements. When he sees and describes his body from the front, the audience, inversely, sees his back (and their front). The performer is facing the same direction as the audience, seeing the same mirror-view. The audience cannot see (the position of) the performer's eyes.

Stage 4

The performer remains turned, facing the mirror. For about five minutes he observes and continuously describes the audience who he can see mirror-reversed from Stage 2 (their right and left now being the same as his). He freely moves about relative to the mirror in order to see different aspects of the audience's behavior. His change of position produces a changing visual perspective which is correspondingly reflected in the description. The audience's view remains fixed; they are not (conventionally) free to move from their seats in relation to the mirror covering the front staging area."

Graham notes that "in stage 2, the audience sees itself reflected by the mirror instantaneously, while the performer's comments are slightly delayed and follow, as they are verbal discourse, a continuous temporal forward flow [...] First, a person in the audience sees himself 'objectively' ('subjectively') perceived by himself; next, he hears himself described 'objectively' ('subjectively') in terms of the performer's perception [...] Cause and effect relations are further complicated when members of the audience (because they can see and be seen in the mirror by other members of the audience) attempt to influence (through eye contact, gestures, etc.) the behavior of other audience members, which thereby influences the performer's (of the audience's behavior)" [In Dan Graham, *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, MIT Press, 1999, pp. 124–5. Originally published by

direction of the mirror, the spectator sees him/herself framed within an inverted version of painting's classic setting that depicts the apparatus of the installation as the background, which, for that matter, continues to generate its time-delay feedback loop irrespective of such a 'classical' standpoint.

Brain-time

These two visual settings bring about an equivocal perception of action. The eight second feedback delay breaks the reflective suspension by allowing the viewer to view him/herself viewing the perpendicular mirror. This is an image which irredeemably fractures the apparent unity of the perceiving subject, not just because the viewer viewing the mirror is perceived from an angle perpendicular to the axis formed by the viewer and the mirror (a denaturalised perspective) but also because such positioning implodes the connection of perception and action provided by the mirror's optical "present-time". Graham distinguishes between video and film based on the ability of the former to produce real-time images contrary to the "discontinuous" temporality of cinema. Such opposition informs the construction of video installations in which real-time or "present-time" is deferred in order to create time-delay feedback circuits⁷. In his work, the time-delay circuits enable the production of images based on a 'present-time' disjunction between perception, behaviour and action. This is achieved through the setting up of visual mechanisms fragmenting perception's temporality (the relationship between perceiver and perception and perception and action) by means of "real-time" optical and informational construction. With the 'continuous' disconnection of subject and subject-image and of perception and action-perception, a hallucinogenic zone is opened up; a zone where the subject perceives his/her own brain activities. Graham suggests that the video installations produce a kind of image of one's own thought; a kind of "brain-time" or "drug time" image.

Anton Herbert, ed. Dan Graham (Ghent: de Appel, 1982), n.p.].

6. The choice of an 8 second delay is not arbitrary as it is the time limit of short-memory, that is, "memory which is part of and influences a person's (present) perception." From this standpoint, the feedback loop engenders an infinite temporal regression, which is constituted at the limit between the perceptive present and the immediate past.

7. For Graham's account of the visual function of the mirror, video, and video feedback, see "Essay on Video, Architecture and Television" in Dan Graham *Two-Way Mirror Power*, pp. 52–61.

8. Apolonija Sustersic, "One Morning Talking with Dan Graham," p. 33.

The analogy for my video time-delay installations was actually Terry Riley's and Steve Reich's music. They were using sounds that were repeated a few seconds later. When you hear one sound after the other you would have an immediate feedback to what you heard before: so, there was a phasing situation. It would influence your brain-time in terms of creating a kind of new time, which wasn't long, melodical time as in former compositions but like drug time. We were inside ourselves perceiving: it is our perception process you sensed...you would be very aware of what was happening inside of your brain.⁸

The feedback loop is in the brain. But the perception of brain time only occurs through the perception of an external image of an action that has just passed, followed by another perception, and so on. Drug time comes about as a continuum and circular equivocation between what one sees and what one does, turning the perceiver inwards, towards the activity of his/her brain perceiving, or conversely, pulling the brain outside the body, creating a brain-image that, in its hallucinogenic condition, is as 'objective' as 'subjective'.

The World of Glass, Mirrors and Videos

Were we to name Graham's artistic strategy, we would term it expansive reductionism. As in other conceptual artworks, the reduction of the art object to basic structures operates as a means of bringing about the social and historical conditions of its production and reception. In many ways, the depuration of the artwork from artifice and inessential facets enables a remarkable expansion and complication of its structure on the level of socio-historical signification. For instance, mirrored-walls functioning as visual settings resonate with Renaissance painting visual frame and, within that visual background, as a milieu for the reflective formation of the perceiving self. However, Graham was not interested in making an opaque reference to the history of painting (although that reference is there, in the artwork). It was instead the actual and pervasive deployment of the classic "picture-window" in commercial and corporate architecture, reinstating inequalities of power and the commodification of individuals (alienating the self through an endless play of visual reflection, transparency and opacity) that made the recourse to glass and mirror relevant. The installations, interlinking informational circuits, modern architecture and performance, deal with the transcendental conditions of spatiotemporal experience inasmuch as these are bound to concrete socio-historical conditions. To some extent, the movement delineated in this text – perception→action→brain-time – elicits pure experience (the seeming perception of one's brain activity), the experience of internal mental action extricated from the external world, only to bring forward the technical and ideological dimensions that render this possible. Importantly, brain-time is concomitant with drug-time, that is, the instance of perception of inner activity (the traumatic fissure of the subject) is intrinsically related to the infinite regress made out of recent pasts, the circular abyss of a present continuously stretched by the endless succession of recent pasts. Confronting the subject with its inner mental states is an experiential depuration of the contemporary world of spectacularisation of social relations; it is, in many ways, the experiential limit of that world.

Present Continuous Past(s) therefore installs two interrelated processes which are present in much of Graham's oeuvre: formal and technical

minimalism as a way of inducing a plastic expansion of artwork's contradictory field of signification. Rather than considering baroque semiotics and formal minimalism as two distinct (albeit interrelated) facets of the installation, it is perhaps more correct to conceive them as engendering a double and reciprocal movement: the *minimalisation* of plastic semiotics and the *baroquisation* of techno-formal structures. The installation sets up a structural intertwining of perception and technical apparatuses so that vision is equated with a given techno-optical system, the 'bare' conditions of perception. This allows the staging of an opposition between opticality and pictoriality so as to release the function of the former from the cultural burden of the latter. It is from this initial position that the perceiver gets reduced to an optical angle within the given specular device, and that the eye and the camera become subjective/objective viewpoints within the installation's optical schema. Nevertheless, in effect, the visual objectification of perception is achieved not so much by the positivist denuding of the optico-informational structure; it is rather the result of image-projection, that is, the positing of the viewer presupposed by the content of the image. Both video-image and mirror-image operate as picture windows, that is, as the semiotic visual environments through which the spectator is both observer and observed. The image gains autonomy insofar as it precedes and initiates the relationship between perceiver and perceived. From this perspective, *Present Continuous Past(s)* puts into motion a movement that starts with material systems of signification which code, socially and historically, the mirrors, the camera, the monitor, and the installation's space, in order to establish a first moment of destabilization of representation where perception is laid bare, 'stripped' from given significations and confronted with the techno-optical apparatus that makes its material existence possible. In turn, this first moment of displacement, the dislodgment of perception and perceiver from their 'natural' ground, proves the starting point for the construction of a disjunctive specular system composed of several feedback circuits, which engenders a tensional connection between perception, techno-social situation and action. Self-referential structures contradictorily re-enact the social and cultural context in which perception and subjectification take place, the optico-informational ground of spectacle, asserting the impossibility of a positivist extraction of the technical apparatus from given systems of signification. It corresponds also to a crude presentation of the material and technical devices that make the capitalist spectacularisation of social relations possible. The seeming extrication of material and technical content from social signification is both an impossible task and an ideological operation from which the positivistic and technocratic validation of the spectacular dissolution of subjectivity arises. However, as *Present Continuous Past(s)* demonstrates, this is a necessary exercise for the critical apprehension of the material and technical machine that such a production of subjectification

involves. There is no material content that is not accompanied by corresponding processes of codification; every code has its socio-material mode of existence.

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